

# What the Monthly Magazine for Nuclear Strike Survivors Wrote About



JAVIER HIRSCHFELD

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**Shelters in the yard, aggressive packs of rats, burial of corpses, cannibalism, marauding neighbors... Reading this magazine, published 30 years ago, is both scary and instructive, especially considering that the threat of nuclear war has not disappeared from the political reality of the modern world.**

In the early 1980s, you could find something on British newsagents that you wouldn't find today. For example, a magazine with a rather grim-sounding title: Protect & Survive Monthly, or PSM for short.

The publication aimed to teach British citizens how to survive a nuclear war.

"How many citizens know what to do to protect their own lives and the lives of their loved ones?" asked the magazine's editor, Colin Bruce Sibley, in the very first issue.

"And how many of us will look up at the sky in bewilderment," he continued, "waiting for the bomb to explode over their heads and send them into eternity?"



One of the main topics from issue to issue was the construction of shelters - as well as the fight against parasites

The name PSM was a reference to the government's then-running Protect and Survive information campaign, which aimed to teach Britons the basics of survival in the event of nuclear Armageddon (although the magazine was not affiliated with the government).

Many Britons remember the brochures and videos distributed by the authorities at the time, but the magazine with the same name seems to have sunk into oblivion.

With North Korea and the US now exchanging threats and Pyongyang testing nuclear weapons, reading this old journal in 2017 is an instructive, if not disturbing, experience.

- How realistic is the scenario of war on the Korean Peninsula?
- "Buzzer": a radio station for spies or a "dead man's hand"?
- The Secret Base Where the World Could End
- Nuclear bomb: weapon of the apocalypse or peacemaker?



Among his regular topics were: building a nuclear shelter, burying dead relatives, cannibalism, and even the problems of protecting against swarms of proliferating rats.

Those who published the magazine and those who read it were part of the survivalist movement, which promoted the ideas of civil defense.

In the early 1980s, tensions between nuclear powers, and more specifically between the United States and the USSR, were very high.



One family set up an experiment for the magazine: is it possible to live in a shelter for a long time?

From the contents of the magazine, many of which are held in the British Library in London, one can get a fairly clear picture of what the writers and editors of Protect & Survive Monthly thought of the future.

For example, the cover of the first issue depicted a family in protective suits and gas masks against the backdrop of a typical English country house.

Here's the cover of another issue: a happy mother nurses her baby in the safety of a nuclear fallout shelter.

Another cover: a launch pad with huge ballistic missiles. Everything around is red and black. A nuclear mushroom is rising on the horizon.

As you look through the magazine, you can't help but feel that for its authors, nuclear war was not just one of the possible futures, they considered it practically inevitable.

In the conclusion to the first issue, editor Sibley writes: "If shelters are built now and the principles of civil defense are thoroughly studied, the number of casualties can be reduced to a minimum."

It seems as if a nuclear strike is expected any minute.



Protect and Survive Monthly was published in the early 1980s and had its own readership

So what, in that case, needs to be done, what needs to be learned? The main emphasis was on building one's own shelter near the house.

Every issue of PSM is filled with adverts from British and international companies willing to build you such a shelter or send you one to bury in your garden and, if necessary, to enter through a small hatch.

Issue after issue features DIY tips from DIY shelter enthusiasts.

The articles are full of minute details - for example, about the effectiveness of radiation protection of various materials.

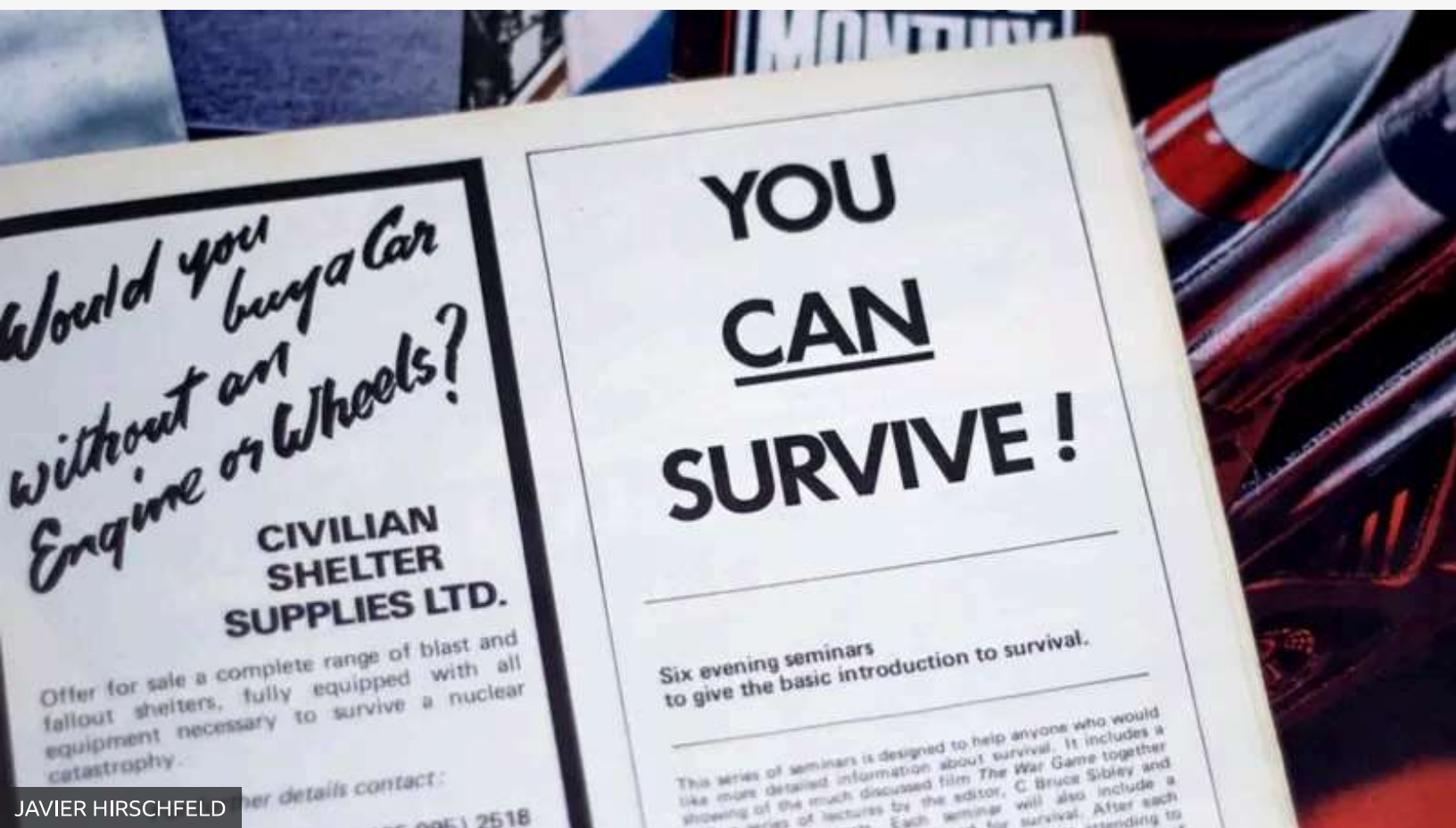
As one of the materials explains, every 18 mm of steel reduces the radiation dose by half, while you would need 71 mm of brickwork to achieve the same result.

PSM once ran a story about a Cornish family who spent two weeks in a shelter, in complete isolation, trying to lead a new life in a world where civilization had been destroyed by a nuclear apocalypse, as an experiment.



Robert and Margaret Farmer and their 11-year-old daughter Sarah emerged triumphantly from the shelter a couple of weeks later - the magazine called their experiment a complete success.

It was noted, however, that little Sarah began to get bored after only the third day in the shelter.



Advertisements in the magazine included shelter-building services, survival seminars, and even special wine packages for those preparing to spend an extended period in the shelter but not wanting to miss out on the pleasure of a glass or two.

The magazine chronicled the construction of shelters across the country, reporting on a Welsh farmer who spent the equivalent of £60,000 (\$78,000) today to build a shelter for himself and his family. Next in line was a shelter for cows.

Readers offered many original ideas. For example, Tony Oldham, editor of another magazine, British Caver, suggested that local caves would make excellent nuclear shelters. Drinking water, he thought, could be collected from dripping stalactites.

Wherever readers were planning to hide from radiation, the magazine offered advice on what to have in a shelter - various tools, fuel, first aid kits and Geiger counters.

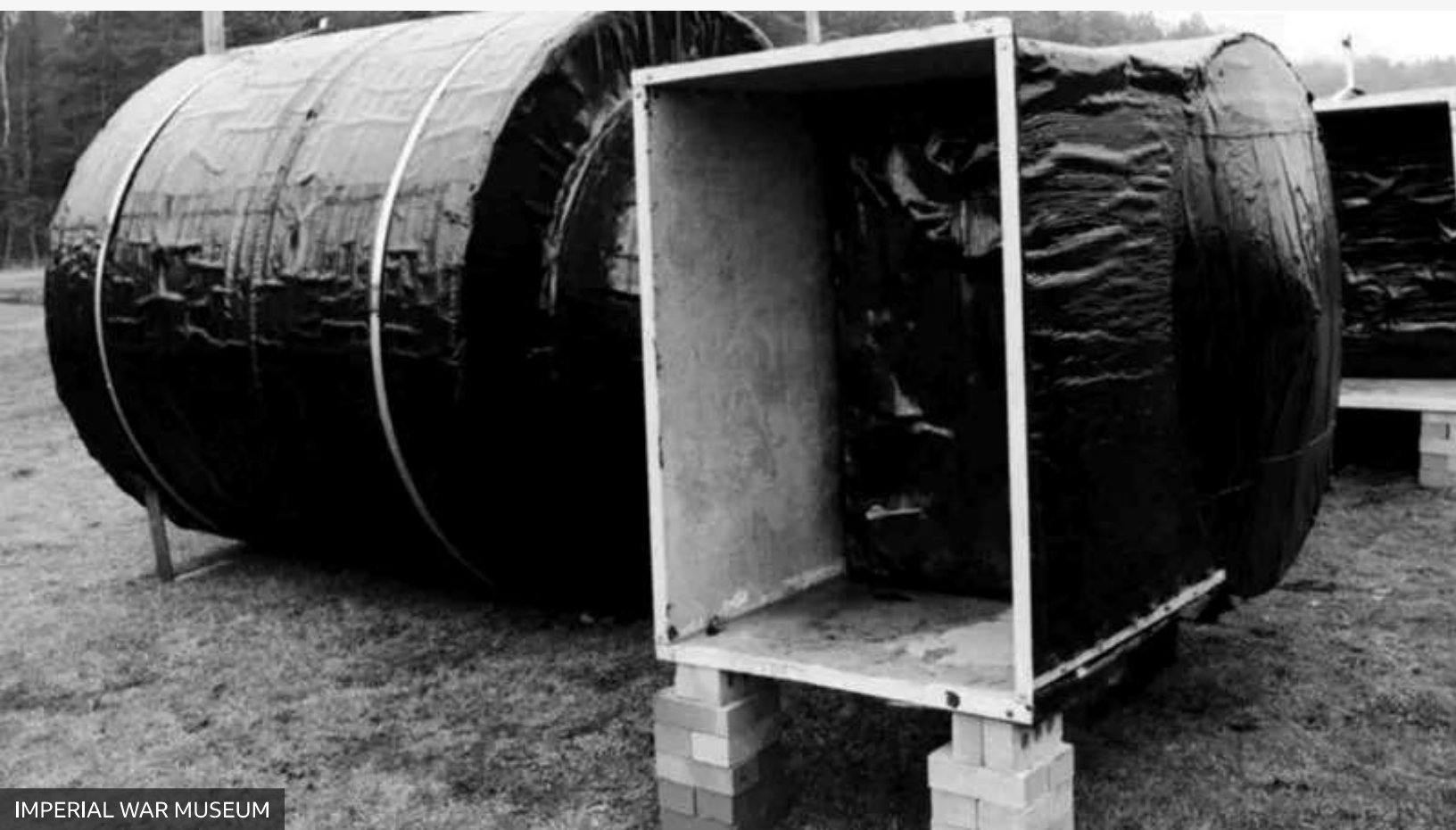
It was advisable to have a month's supply of food. One of the adverts advertised a special selection of wines that could be stored in the shelter.

The slogan read: "You don't want to be standing in line [for wine] at the supermarket when the bombs start falling!"

It was also suggested to acquire protective suits and gas masks.

The magazine's issues contained thousands of pieces of advice for those who wanted to save themselves from radiation. There were also descriptions of how this was done in other countries, in particular, in the Soviet Union, Sweden and Switzerland.

PSM wrote with obvious envy about the Swiss, 90% of whom, as one issue claimed, have quick access to a nuclear shelter.



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

The shelter was designed and built in York by the British Home Office in 1980.

And while it may seem that the survivalists of the early 1980s were mistaken about the possibility of nuclear war, recently declassified documents make it clear that a large-scale war using nuclear weapons was closer than ever in those years.

And calls for the population to take such a possibility seriously may not have been so absurd.

"It was a time when the threat was very real," explains John Preston of the University of East London, who studies civil defence materials from the 1980s. "The superpowers literally had their hand on the trigger."

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"People understood this and were alarmed by the prospect of nuclear war - all the opinion polls showed



that the threat was taken seriously."

One PSM reader still remembers the mood at the time. Max Tookey, now a psychology lecturer at the University of Brighton, was 16 at the time.

So he wrote to the PSM: "The area around Hastings, like many other towns in the South East, is littered with caves, old mines and railway tunnels. Why don't the local authorities convert them into large shelters for the population?"

"I remember being very fascinated by it," Tuki recalls. "My father was literally obsessed with civil defense ideas."

"My school friends and I used to talk about what would happen if that happened, and I felt really excited," he says.

Tuki, like many others, believes that the civil defense system is in a state of disrepair.

He remains enthusiastic about the use of caves as shelters, such as the caves in Chislehurst , Kent, which were used as air- *raid* shelters during the Second World War.



In the 1980s, British television aired a series about two Sheffield families living through the time when Britain was hit by two nuclear bombs

Max Tukey stresses that the threat of nuclear war still exists. "I think we pretend that the threat is over, we just think that it can't happen again," he says.

And while there are far fewer nuclear weapons in the world today than there were 30 years ago, several countries still possess them. And that's enough to destroy our planet - more than once or twice.

So there is still reason to be concerned about the uncertain fate of humanity.

It should be noted that there is a certain contradiction in the publications of PSM magazine. On the one hand, it constantly urges readers to remain optimistic about their chances of survival - they say, you just need to prepare properly.

On the other hand, this optimism sounds rather forced against the backdrop of the grim reality of the approaching nuclear apocalypse, which is often described in considerable detail.



The magazine described with admiration how other countries, such as Sweden, were preparing for nuclear war.

"You may need to be prepared for some unwanted attention from your neighbors (referring to looting - *Ed.*)," notes one article describing the process of obtaining a license to own a firearm.

Another article, which deals with food storage, emphasizes that after a month of living in a shelter, people will inevitably face food shortages.

But we just have to come to terms with this - since the priority will most likely be "measures to maintain law and order, bury the dead, etc."

If marauding neighbours, starvation and the process of burying family members' bodies weren't scary enough, the magazine added to the horror with descriptions of raids by rodents and other wild animals,



large packs of which would inhabit the irradiated British countryside.

"A wounded rat is very dangerous, it can attack while you are reloading your weapon," one article warned. "And if you have to deal with a whole pack, you will need help."



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The magazine tried to maintain optimism about the chances of survival - they said, you just need to prepare properly

They also wrote about the danger posed by animals that had escaped from a zoo. "Their main concern would be finding food, which could be domestic animals or people trapped in a collapsed building or seriously injured," noted one of the magazine's authors, Andrew Barnard. "They would be attracted by the smell of blood."

An Anglican priest once wrote an article for a magazine in which he mused: "Our current taboo against eating human flesh may be disappearing."

"The survivalist discourse is a mixture of optimism and pessimism," Preston notes.

Both Preston and Tookey believe the government should be doing more on civil defence today. But as Preston acknowledges, few British politicians are prepared to discuss the possibility of nuclear war out loud.

But some countries are not shy about providing the population with information about this. For example, in the United States, the Department of Homeland Security offers the basics of how to survive a nuclear attack on the [Ready.gov website](https://www.ready.gov/).

Yes, Protect & Survive Monthly is no longer on newsstands, but unfortunately the threat of nuclear war is still there.

*Special thanks to Jacqueline Arnold, who loaned BBC Future several copies of PSM to illustrate this article.*

**You can read [the original version of this article in English on the BBC Future website](#) .**

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